

The Nutty Professor

A few years ago during my post-Doc, I had an advisor who seemed just plain nuts. Psychiatrists might label him “narcissistic,” “paranoid,” “compulsive,” “anti-social,” “emotionally disregulated,” but I think he was crazy. He’d lash out at students; pound his desk in anger; and threaten to refuse to pay work-study students. While I was working on my project, he’d call me sometimes late at night—twice around midnight—with suggestions. He’d drag on some students’ theses interminably. Nevertheless, I don’t think he ever really “damaged” anyone significantly; he was just very peculiar and unpredictable. And many people found it impossible to work for him.

After weighing the pro’s and con’s of leaving the group, I decided to stick it out unlike several other students who came with a smile but left aghast at what they experienced. However, some students did not leave without first filing formal complaints about my advisor’s behavior with the Dean. Twice, I was asked to testify to the concerns of these students. Knowing that my advisor would destroy me if I said anything negative about him, I hedged and was vague on the really probing questions. After completing my post-Doc, I was asked again to write an evaluation of this nutty professor, and I was kind.

The dilemma is that if I said anything bad about him, I would be kissing a good recommendation good-bye. However, if I didn’t say anything negative, my advisor’s nuttiness would probably continue.

So, my self-interest won out. Now, I always have a good recommendation letter whenever needed. And if I had to do it all over again, I’d do the same thing. In fact, I understand this professor’s behavior has improved, probably as a result of the investigation. So, all’s well that ends well. Had I formally complained, it would have cost me more than I could afford. As I said, if I had to do it all over again, I’d do the same thing.

Expert Opinion

We believe there are two overriding ethical issues in this case. Most important is that students who speak up about the PI must be protected. The second is that, if necessary, the PI’s behavior must be institutionally addressed with efforts at remediation if deemed necessary. But before one pulls out some heavy-duty interventions such as launching an investigation from the Dean’s or Chair’s office, some preliminary, “personnel management” considerations are in order.

As it specifically affects the post-Doc, one would want to know precisely what the problem is with the PI. Is the problem over a grant? A paper? A project? Or chronic unprofessional behavior. We ask this because our experience has been that PIs such as this professor are usually not out to harm anyone explicitly. Rather the harm they wreak is psychological: They usually don’t realize how their problematic behavior affects others, e.g., by terrifying them, causing poor morale, etc. Oftentimes, theirs is a kind of abuse that often stays below a University’s radar screen, as people tend to write it off as unpleasant but tolerable. If personnel left this PI’s in droves, however, it is hard to imagine why any University would keep him on, because the financial and institutional liabilities of a public scandal are usually not worth whatever productivity such people generate. Rather the PI’s neurotic behaviors or odd

personality is usually what others find bewildering and upsetting, perhaps because so many students or supervisees have had little experience in relating to such a person.

On that note, we cannot resist some armchair psychologizing: Our experience with such individuals as the PI has been that they are not malevolent, but often have a core personality that admits a good deal of anxiety and compulsiveness. (Anxiety and especially compulsiveness are often thought to be professionally “adaptive” traits, especially among bright people, since they dispose those persons to be extremely attentive to detail, persevering, focused, and results-oriented. It is not at all surprising that very successful individuals often manifest these traits in high degree.)

What investigators at elite institutions are often most anxious about is the *quality of science* that their lab personnel are doing. The reason, of course, is that if the science is poor, the grant will not be funded, tenures will not be granted, reputations will tank, the lab might dissolve, etc. Once such persons as this PI become suspicious that the science is not up to par—and it doesn’t take them long to reach that conclusion—their poorly regulated emotional architecture gets the best of them, and they can act badly.

An approach that we therefore recommend is that the lab personnel and especially the post-Doc learn how to “control” the PI. Now, because *lack of communication* so often heightens the anxiety of such persons as the PI, the postDoc (and others) should try to 1) discern as much and with as much precision as possible what the PI is expecting from him or her by way of the grant, paper, project, etc., and 2) maintain an extremely regular and constant stream of communication with the PI on the progress pertaining to exactly those interests and concerns.

The psychological Albert Bernstein has written about how compulsive personalities (and all compulsives are driven by fear and anxiety) like nothing better than to be working and surrounded by similarly, hard working people:

[W]ork is their pride, their joy, their obsession, their drug, the alpha and omega of their existence. It is their gift, and the cross they have to bear. When Obsessive-Compulsives are working, they feel good about themselves and safe. If you want to feel safe, you’d better be working too. (p. 184)

Consequently, one of the best ways to “manage” such people is by a steady stream of contact whose content is incisive, anticipatory of problems, and pertinent to the desired outcome. To the extent that our postDoc—as well as the other people in the lab—can impress the PI with their own compulsiveness, their relationship will probably go as smoothly as it can. Moreover, the postDoc will learn a valuable lesson: that now, he or she is assuming something of a “managerial” function—i.e., from a graduate student who largely took and executed orders to a post-Doc who now must learn to “drive” people and projects.

But if that approach fails, we can go to Plan B but recall our primary ethical objective of protecting the personnel involved. This might very well entail re-locating some of the PI’s students or post-Docs to another lab. The Chair might very well want to appoint a committee whose members will conduct numerous conversations and inquiries among lab personnel, so that some kind of reliable picture of the PI’s behaviors appears. For example, is there a pattern to the PI’s behavior, or is it more a one-time event related to some discrete situation? The investigation would probably be conducted by the PI’s Chair who will ultimately decide on what kind of response is needed from the PI, e.g., apologies to personnel, a treatment program for

unprofessional behavior, or dismissal from the University. The committee members must act especially in good faith, meaning that they will not allow whatever concerns they might have about the PI retaliating against them to overwhelm their duty to deal justly with the situation and insure that the PI's future students will be treated professionally and respectfully. Obviously, the committee will want to develop a large paper trail that corroborates their findings and recommendations, as it might very well be the case that the PI will want to vigorously defend himself against the charges. The post-Doc is especially vulnerable in all this and should be assigned to a group of mentors who can keep his career on track.

These kinds of situations are not uncommon. Every research university will have its share of peculiar personalities. Perhaps the most challenging problem for leadership is to proceed with courage through the various stages of an investigation, and especially to recognize that faculty simply do not have the right to demean or disrespect their students or supervisees. Students should be informed that such is the case and that when, in their best judgment, faculty are acting inappropriately, they can avail themselves of help without fear of retaliation or penalty. Oftentimes, faculty like the PI do not appreciate the impact of their problematic behaviors on others, and if they continue such behaviors, it is almost always because their institutions allow them to. After all, the reason the dilemma contributor feels somewhat confident that his "keeping silent" strategy worked is because—not surprisingly—he was decidedly convinced that it was his safest option. And he obviously formed that impression by observing the mores of the various institutions with which he was familiar. That is unfortunate. Personnel who are at the lower end of an organization's pyramid of power or authority are owed better.

References:

1. Bernstein AJ. *Emotional Vampires: Dealing With People Who Drain You Dry*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2001.